

THE TRADITION OF THE NAVA DURGA IN BHAKTAPUR, NEPAL

Jehanne H. Teilhet

San Diego

Introduction

Nine miles east of Kathmandu, in Nepal, is ancient Bhaktapur (Bhadgaon), "The city of Devotees." The indigenous people are Newars; over 80 per cent of them are farmers. They are predominantly Hindu, with several Buddhist cloisters in the eastern section.

Bhaktapur is famous for its temple architecture and its magnificent representations of the gods and goddesses—created, in the main, by anonymous Newar masters during the reign of the Mallas. Scholars have given much attention to these elite art forms, but little to the surviving folk arts such as the Nava Durga masks.

Nava Durga is a ceremony that is ritually marked by a set of masks, which, on public occasions, are worn and danced with. These masks are unique to Bhaktapur and they have special properties that distinguish them from most mask traditions. The process of making them is regulated by a set of rituals which sanctifies the materials as being above the ordinary. The efficacy of these masks is not restricted to the period of time that they are worn, as is the case with other masks. These masks have a continual life force or energy independent of whether they are worn or are in residence at a specific site or god-house. The masks make particular statements that transcend ordinary social reality. They are the focal point of the Nava Durga ceremonies that are performed from Dasain, or Durga Puja, in late September or early October, until Bhagasti in June. Each year the masks are made anew by the special mask-maker in the four weeks preceding Dasain.

These masks are informed with meaning; they have a tantric significance which is esoteric and can not be fully read by non-initiates or outsiders. But the masked performances are intentionally directed to the non-initiated public, which is the great majority of the population, and these folk levels of meaning have a socio-cultural importance in themselves. This paper will focus on the process of making these masks and their contextual levels of folk meaning.

* The author is grateful to Ms. Diane D'Andrade for her comments and editing on all the drafts of this paper, and to Dr. Robert I. Levy for his comments and for confirming some of the interpretations given here from his own notes on Bhaktapur. This paper could not have been written without the help of Visnu and Surya Bahadur Citrakar, Krishna Banamal and Bhagatamal Banamal. Field work was partially funded by an Academic Senate grant from the University of California, San Diego, in 1974. Direct quotations not otherwise attributed are from Visnu Bahadur Citrakar.

The Nava Durga mask ceremonies are said to be over 200 years old. There are specific oral traditions which explain their origin and the reasons why certain castes were given their respective responsibilities in relation to the Nava Durga. The oral traditions confirm that the Nava Durga are indigenous to Bhaktapur and they affirm their connection with the Taleju Brahmin priest, of the highest caste; the land-owner farmer, a *gyapu*, who discovered them, a person of middle caste; and the lower caste gardeners, the *gatha*, who have been given the honor of dancing and caring for them.

The Nava Durga are important to the agricultural cycle in Bhaktapur. When the ceremonies are completed in June, the masks are ritually burned and the ashes are collected and stored in a sacred vessel in the Hanumante river until they are retrieved to be mixed with new materials to make the next set of masks in September. Visnu Bahadur Citrakar, the Nava Durga mask-maker, believes that "the Nava Durga leave their masks and the *gathas* (members of the gardener caste) who care for them to go into the water because the water is necessary for the planting of rice." According to Krishna Banamal, a Nava Durga dancer, "the Nava Durga help with the other crops when they are above ground. They help the farmers and gardeners with all their crops because they were found by a farmer and cared for by gardeners."

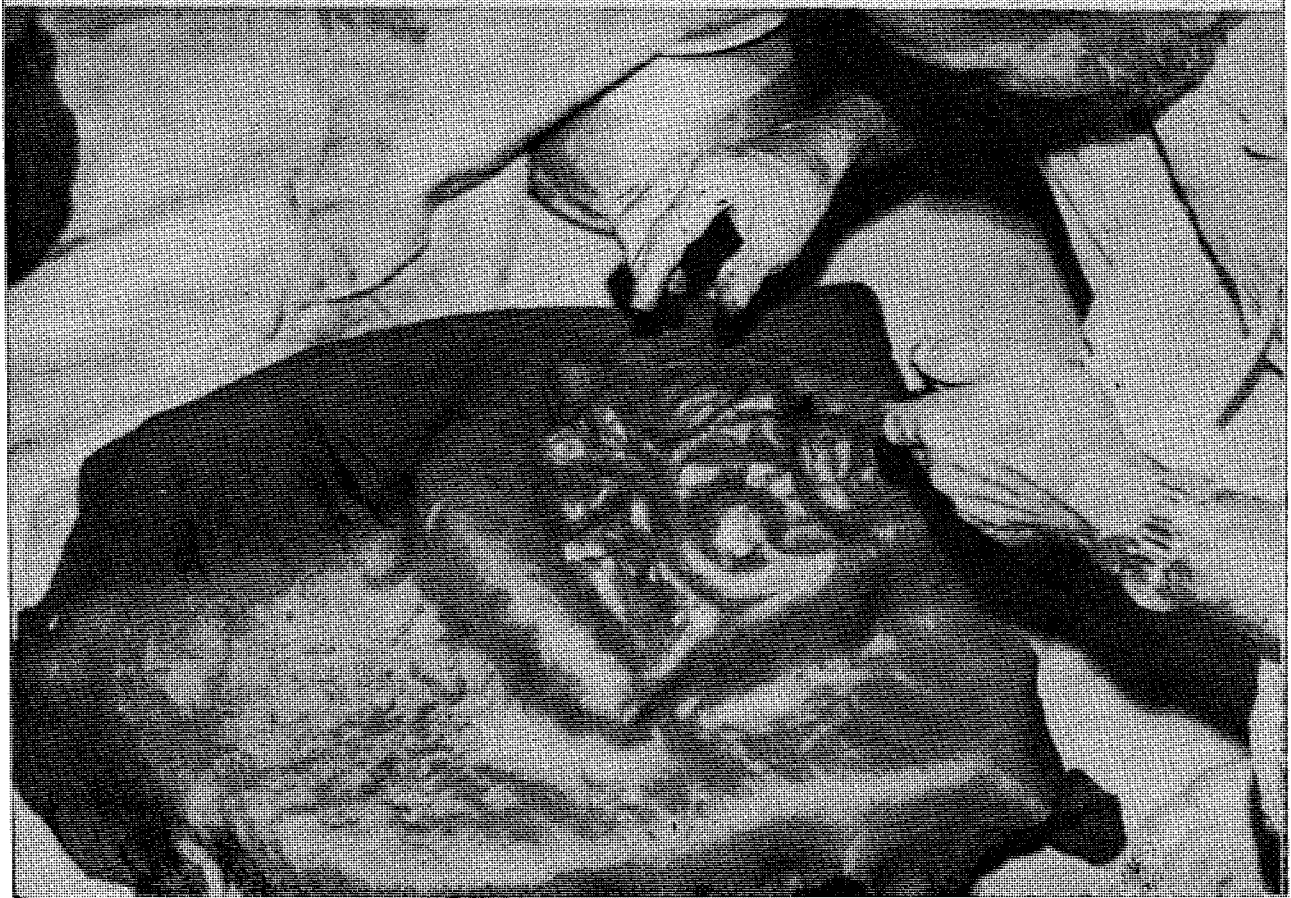
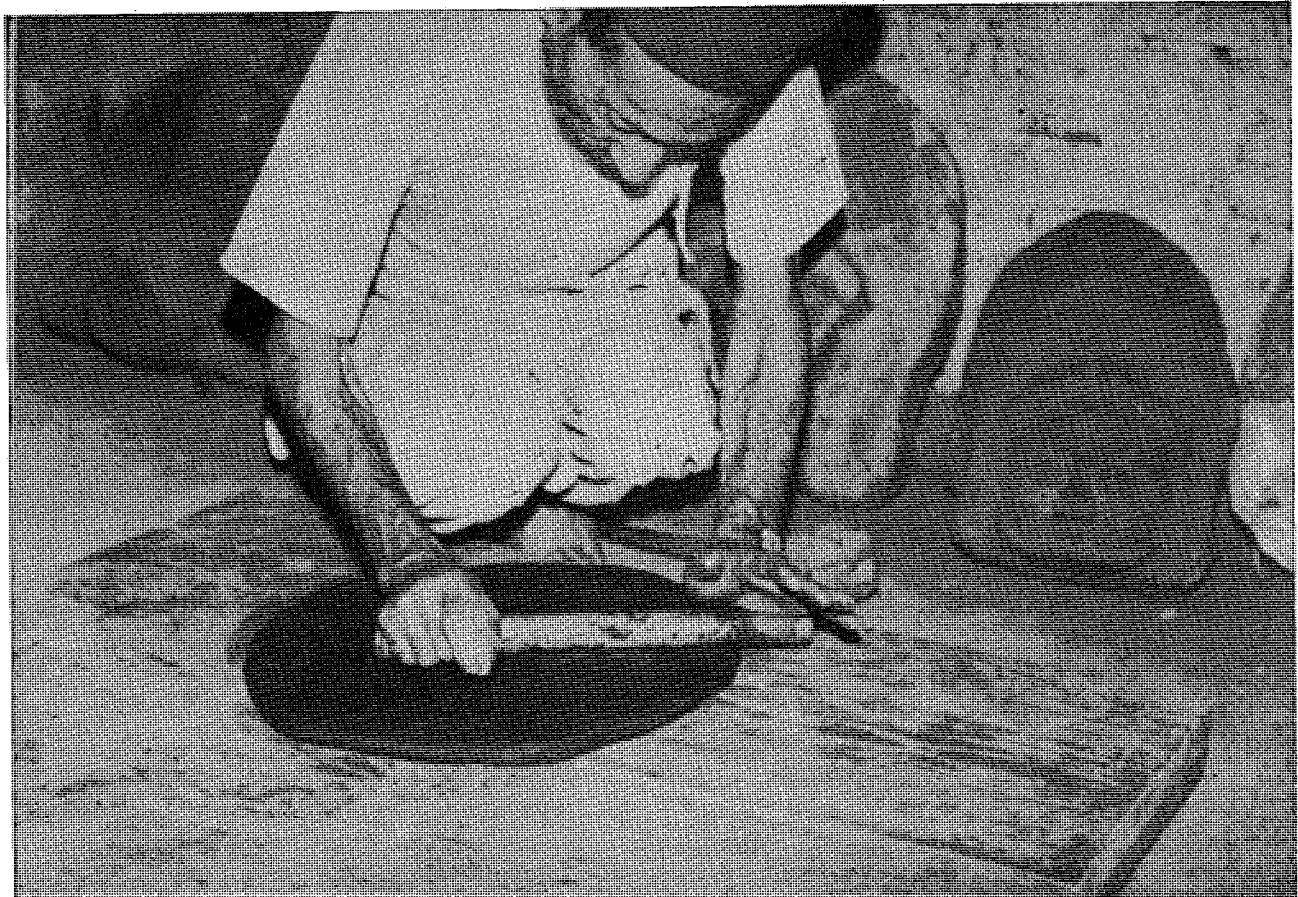
The Nava Durga

Literally translated from Sanskrit, Nava Durga means nine Durgas. Durgas are the various demonic representations or manifestations of Parvati, the *sakti* of Siva in the tantric tradition. The oldest form of Durga is said in Bhaktapur to be the goddess Taleju, who predates the Nava Durga. Taleju is important to the Nava Durga, even though she is not represented within the Nava Durga pantheon. The Nava Durgas are subordinate to her and at prescribed times they visit her temple within the enclosure of the Royal Palace.

Though the name Nava Durga means nine Durgas, there are thirteen masks which participate in public ceremonies and of these, only seven represent Durgas. However, Visnu Bahadur Citrakar said that there are nine Durgas represented: "Maha Kali, Kumari, Varahi, Brahmani, Mahesvari, Vaisnavi, Indrani, Mahalaksmi and Tripura Sundari." One of these, Mahalaksmi, is not represented in public by a mask, but by a two-dimensional repoussé silver icon. Another, Tripura Sundari, is not visually represented to the public; her mask is kept inside the Nava Durga *Ga che* (god-house) with the other "secret" mask of Mahalaksmi.

The remaining six of the thirteen masks represent Siva; his son Ganesa; Bhairava and Seto Bhairava, manifestations of Siva; and the guardians, Sima and Duma.

The individual gods and goddesses which collectively form the Nava Durga are well known to the people of Bhaktapur. They belong to the Hindu-Brahmanical pantheon and are venerated by Hindus and many Buddhists.



1. (above) Vishnu Bahadur rolls out clay.

2. (below) The clay is modelled over a mold.



3. (above) The mask, with a cloth which prevents sticking, is lifted from the mold.
4. (below) Strips of paper covered with glue are applied.

Some Notes on the Contextual Folk Meanings of the Nava Durga

The Nava Durga performances render visible, in an active and dramatic form, specific ideologies and beliefs which bring a sense of order and definition to the Newar's culture. And the fact that they are active, mobile forms, makes them more dramatic than their statuary counterparts.

Many of the iconographical elements found in the Nava Durga masks correspond with the traditional imagery of these gods and goddesses as depicted in paintings or statuary. However, some of the iconographical elements found in the Nava Durga masks have a communicative importance apart from their expressive tantric significance. These iconographical elements clarify the role and status of these collective gods and goddesses. For example, eight of the Nava Durga masks have "a precious green jewel" at the apex of the nose, (Maha Kali, Kumari, Varahi, Siva, Bhairava, Seto Bhairava, Sima and Duma). This green jewel is a symbol for the bindu and it distinguishes the major Nava Durga gods and goddesses from the minor ones. The bindu mark differentiates the main performers from the non-bindu chorus of Brahmani, Mahesvari, Vaisnavi, and Indrani, who are the least demonic forms of Durga.

Siva is considered the Lord of the Nava Durga. The Nava Durga emanate from Siva's sakti; he is therefore responsible for the Nava Durga, but in a passive, disinterested way. The Siva mask is smaller than the other masks and has no eye openings. The mask is not worn; it is carried by Ganesa. The people say that "Siva must be carried because he is blind with anger and fury. In blindness he can damage everything and he doesn't care what damages he causes." (Krishna Banamal, a Nava Durga dancer) Siva can be painted "blue-black (the tantric symbol of energy and power) or white (the tantric symbol of male semen), but in the Nava Durga he is red because he is in an angry mood." (Vishnu Bahadur Citrakar). "Ganesa carries Siva because he is very smart. He knows how to control the anger of his father; he carries Siva to keep him from doing more damage and destruction." (Krishna Banamal). The folk interpretation explains why the mask is not worn. However, Siva is portrayed as a handsome young man with a beard and a moustache. Siva is not a tantric god. The fact that the mask is small and can not be worn signals his peripheral role in the Nava Durga pantheon.

Mahalaksmi does not have a public mask. This points to her unique role in the Nava Durga pantheon. She is considered to be the Nava Durga's own goddess because she is more abstract and powerful. Mahalaksmi is in touch with the goddess Taleju and she gives her powers to the other Nava Durgas. Mahalaksmi always leads the processions of masked Nava Durga dancers because she is the most important member of the group. She is depicted in an assertive body stance exquisitely rendered in silver repoussé. The six-armed image of Mahalaksmi is framed by lions at her feet and a large aureole of flames. Mahalaksmi has no face. The face, if it was ever represented, has been carefully cut out from the surface plane. According to Visnu Bahadur, "the non-initiated public is not allowed to gaze upon her face because it is so terrible, . . . so beautiful. They lack pro-

tection from her powers." Mahalaksmi is carried in a brass-covered wooden chariot which gives the appearance of a miniature one-storey Hindu temple. When Mahalaksmi is in residence at a particular site the mask of Siva hangs from the roof of her chariot-temple. The Siva mask underlines her importance in the Nava Durga pantheon.

All the Nava Durga masks, with the exception of Seto Bhairava, have elaborate headdresses which enhance their extraordinary character. The absence of this iconographical element prominently marks Seto Bhairava's somewhat unusual, inferior role within the Nava Durga pantheon. He is the only one who is allowed to dance with Maha Kali, but he plays the dupe to demonstrate her greater powers. He is a somewhat comical figure whose romantic and often obscene overtures Maha Kali appears to spurn. This sexual licentiousness may relate to the fertility and increase of the crops.

Included among the major performers of the Nava Durga pantheon are the less widely known goddesses Sima and Duma. (Visnu Bahadur also identified the tantric form of Sima as male, however, because of his white color, and Duma as female, because she is orange.) Sima translates as tiger and Duma as lion; their masks represent these animals. They are portrayed roaring, an expression of their fierceness. Visnu Bahadur told me they were messengers of death; later he said they were the bodyguards of Siva. They always dance together, rarely, if ever, dancing with the other gods and goddesses. Their dances, like those of Seto Bhairava and Maha Kali, provide a form of comic relief as well as serving a police function. Children will often taunt Sima and Duma and try to get the two to chase them. However, should a child be caught by either of them, it is considered an evil omen. The parents often pay Sima and Duma beforehand so that their children will not be caught. This belief reflects their roles as messengers of death.

Each of the potentially destructive Nava Durgas has a small face painted on the center of its tightly woven circular headband. These miniature faces represent "the peaceful manifestations of Visnu and Siva. They are necessary because they compliment the powers of the Nava Durgas. If the gods and goddesses did not have these they could become unruly in their public performances." (Bhagatamal Banamal, a Nava Durga dancer. Siva, Ganesa and Varahi wear the face of Narsingha, the half-lion, half-man, tantric incarnation of Visnu. It is generally agreed that the moustached face on Bhairava's headband represents Brahma. According to Bhagatamal Banamal, "The face on Bhairava is Brahma. Brahma is the educator, he controls Bhairava because Bhairava is the manifestation of the god Siva. Bhairava is very powerful and Brahma is there to balance his power." Bhagatamal Banamal also said that the face on Maha Kali could be either Visnu or Vaisnavi, the sakti of Visnu. Visnu Bahadur concurred and added that "they both have green faces and wear jewelry, but Visnu does not usually have red lips whereas Vaisnavi does."

The other gods and goddesses of the Nava Durga pantheon correspond in iconography and character to their given attributions.

The Maker of the Nava Durga Masks

Visnu Bahadur Citrakar is the maker of the Nava Durga masks; he is seventy-one years old. According to him and his son, Surya, their family has made the Nava Durga masks from the very beginning. He believes that the guthi gave the duty of making the Nava Durga masks to the citrakar caste because this type of artisanry fell into their routine professional calling. The guthi, however, gave only one extended citrakar family the special privilege of making the Nava Durga masks, and this right can be revoked and given to another citrakar family. In return for making the masks, the family was given good land and tenants to farm it.

When Visnu Bahadur dies, Surya, as eldest son, must follow the tradition and make the masks. If there is more than one son in the family, the father must teach the traditional method to all his sons, though the rights to the ritual fall to the eldest son. If there were only daughters in the family, they could not make the Nava Durga masks, nor could their husbands. The duty would pass to the closest male relative. Although the father teaches his sons, they must also, as he did, pay a Gubaju to educate them in the ways of the Nava Durga gods and goddesses, including the esoteric knowledge of tantra and mantra that is used in making the masks.

All the citrakars are "Hindu-Buddhists" and, as Visnu Bahadur stated, "We have many religious beliefs that are the result of Hinduism and Buddhism. We worship Buddha as the tenth incarnation of the god Visnu, after whom I was named."

Visnu Bahadur is an artist who works within a relatively strict iconographical tradition which constrains personal innovation and creativity. He cannot manipulate or change the legibility of the iconographical elements or colors to suit his own aesthetic sensibilities. He can and does, however, strive for an aesthetic excellence within set forms. And it is this criterion of excellence that distinguishes his works and gains him respect from the other citrakars.

The Ritualized Process of Making the Nava Durga Masks

Half in jest, Visnu Bahadur said that being the maker of the Nava Durga masks was more difficult than being a priest. The priest can read in his texts what the characteristics of the gods and goddesses must be, but the artist has to create them.

The masks are the main markers of the Nava Durga ceremonies, and the process of making them is heavily ritualized. The special, prescribed actions, repeated over and over again in the making of each set of Nava Durga masks, lend continuity and stability to the ritual, though they may seem illogical or unnecessary to the outsider. These formal actions, sanctioned by religion, are thought to have an esoteric importance, which is only fully comprehensible to the initiated. As a non-initiate and a woman, I was not allowed to watch the making of the actual Nava Durga masks. I commissioned Visnu Bahadur to make a mask of Maha Kali and asked at each step how the making of the actual Nava

Durga masks differed from that of the commissioned mask. Visually, it is difficult to detect the differences between the commissioned Maha Kali and the one used in the ceremony, although the materials used differ somewhat.

There are several rituals which precede the mask-maker's role in the Nava Durga sequence. First, on Gatha Muga Carhae¹, the day when farmers traditionally finish planting rice, straw figures are burned. These effigies are named after a demon, Ghanta Karna. It is a Newar custom that GhantaKarna be burned "in order to show the other demons and ghosts in the locality that if they do any harm to the people and to their crops, they will also be burned." (Surya Bahadur).

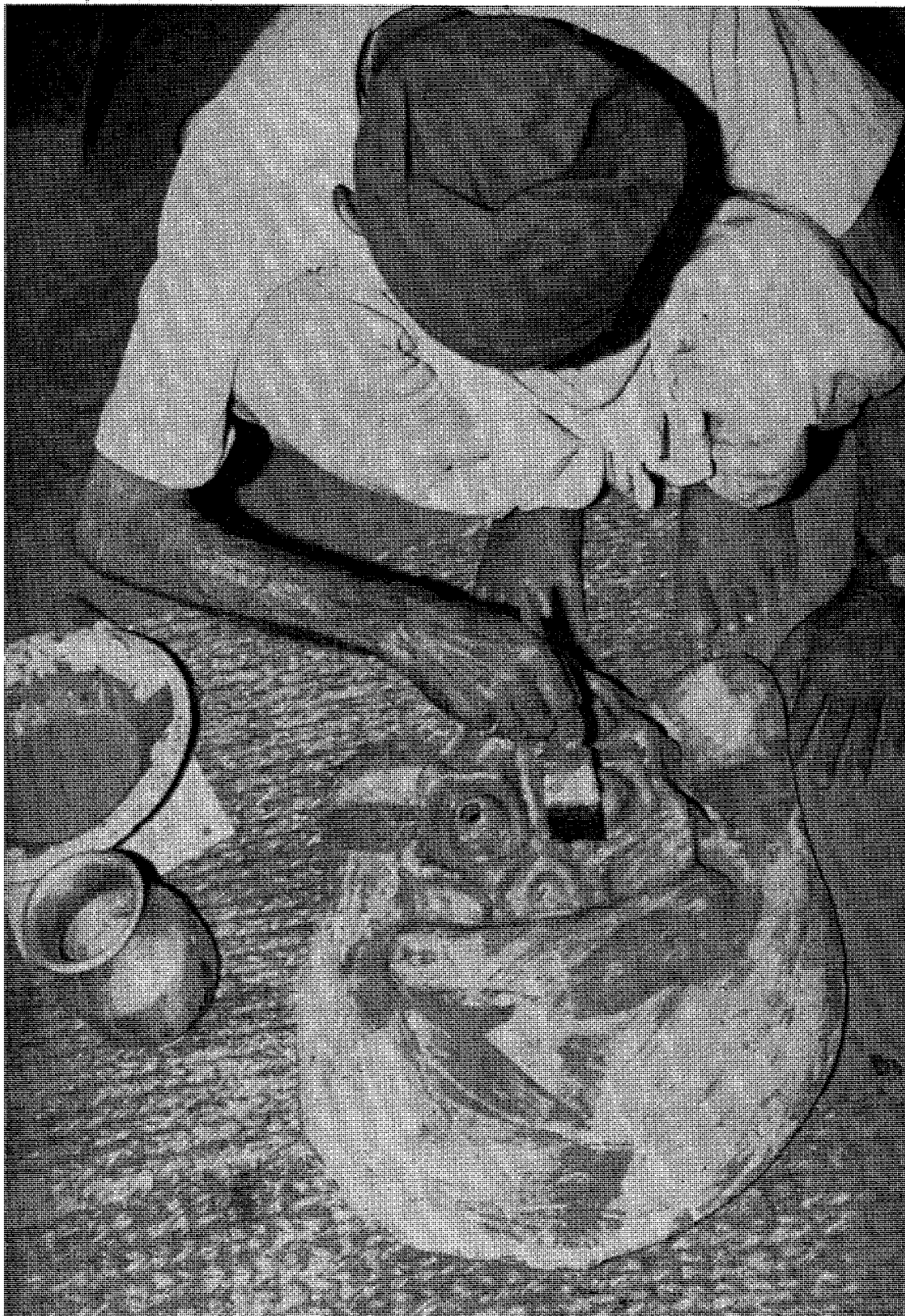
Following the burning of the demons, the gathas who have been chosen to dance in the current year's set of Nava Durga dances perform a mask-less Nava Durga dance. Afterwards, the gathas proceed to Talako tol to ask the elders of the prajapati caste the pottery makers, where they should go to find the proper clay, *dya ca* ('god-soil'), for the Nava Durga masks. The elders usually advise the gathas to go to Sokja, a field some thirty minutes walk north-east of Bhaktapur. "*Dya ca* is unlike the ordinary soil found in the area; it is special and the gathas must dig very deep for it." (Surya Bahadur). They reject soil which has too much sand in it. Though *dya ca* is black, the color has no tantric significance. "What matters is the plasticity of the clay and that it is strong."

Visnu Bahadur said that the gathas then take the clay to the holy house of the Lord of the Nava Durga, Siva, in Ya che. The gathas shape some of the clay into a squarish form about ten inches high and six inches wide, and in the middle of this form they make a hole and stand a statue of Siva. A priest presides as they sacrifice a rooster to Siva and the Nava Durga. This ritual is tantric and gives magic and life to the clay. The now sacred clay is divided into thirteen equal parts. This may imply that the two secret masks are not made anew each year. The divided sacred clay is then re-mixed with the rest of the clay to give it magic and life. All the clay is now sanctified and it is dried and ground into a powder, and stored in a clay pot in the holy house at Ya che, where Visnu Bahadur will work on the masks at the prescribed time.

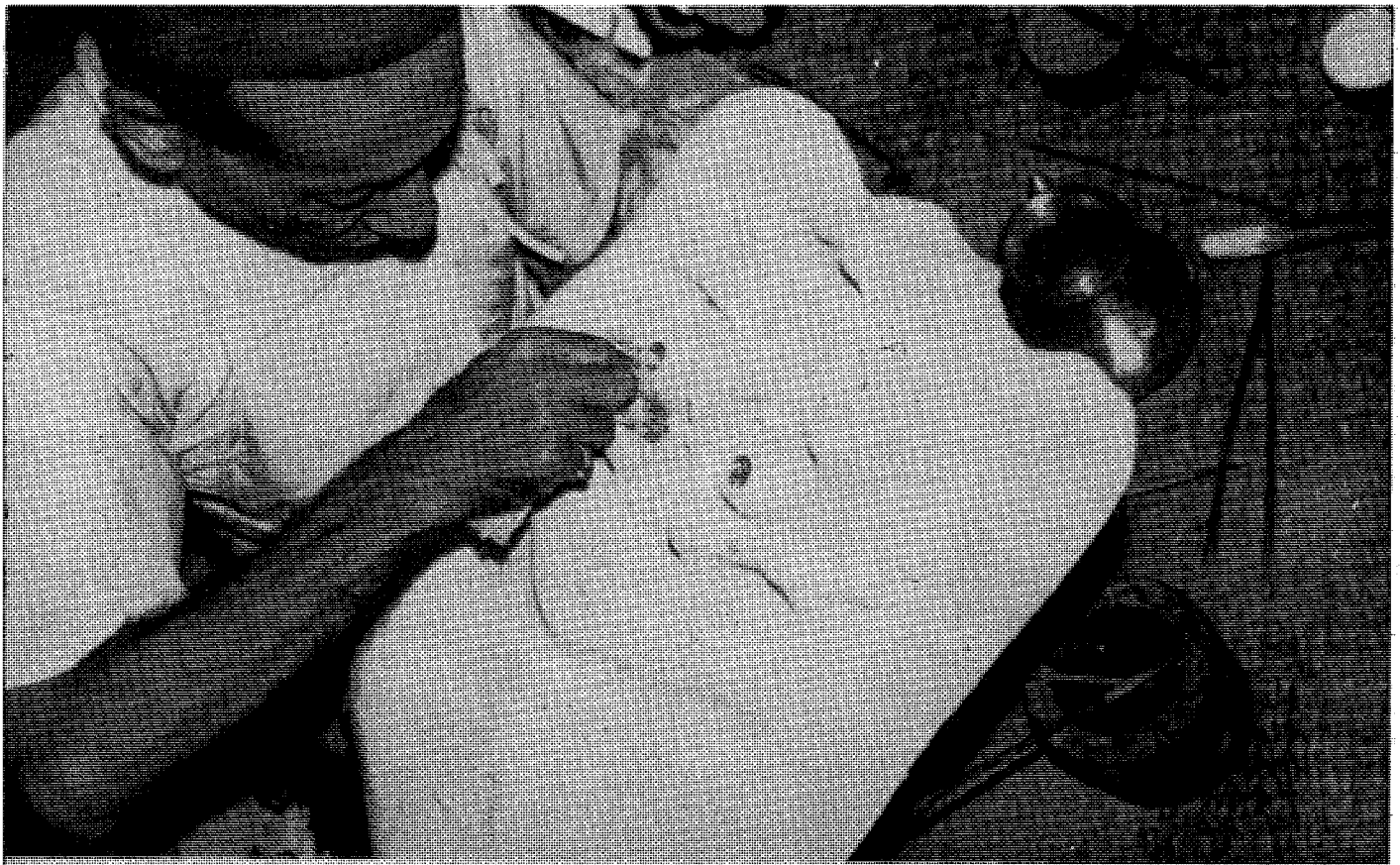
At this point, the ashes of last year's Nava Durga masks are brought out of their secret hiding place and given to the mask-maker to blend with the sacred *dya ca* "for the tantra of the new masks." Last year's masks were ritually burned at the end of the season in June and the ashes stored in a watertight jar in the river.

One month before Dasain, Visnu Bahadur, his son, and perhaps his brother, enter the holy house at Ya che. Visnu Bahadur said that he uses "some mantra, a magic spell the priest gave me for making the Nava Durga masks. I use the mantra in making a puja at Ya che before beginning to work on the masks." He would not answer questions about the sequence in which the masks are made. There may be a particular order in making the masks.

1. Gatha Muga is the name of a demon who prostituted his mother; Carhae is the fourteenth day of the lunar fortnight, here the dark half of Sraavan. In 1977 this fell on August 8.



5. White pigment serves as primer, ground, and base color.



6. (above) Primed surface is rubbed smooth with jute fibers.
7. (below) Outlines are painted in light red.

The steps of mask making are initially the same for all the masks. After making a puja to the Nava Durga, the *dya ca* dust and the ashes of the former Nava Durga masks are mixed with bits of cotton and gum-like paste made from wheat flour. This mixture is once again separated into thirteen lumps; hours are spent pounding and kneading these lumps. Visnu Bahadur does not do much of the strenuous work because the strain on his muscles might cause his hands to shake when he is doing the fine, detailed painting.

When the sacred clay has become plastic or workable it is ready for forming. The individual lumps of clay are placed on wooden boards, pounded with a mallet, and rolled into flat oblong shapes about a quarter of an inch thick. Each is gently placed over a low relief mould (*thasa*) of one of the Nava Durga gods or goddesses, which has been covered with a clean black cloth of fine quality. The cloth prevents the clay from adhering to the mould. The mask-makers gently press the flattened clay with their fingers so that it conforms to the contours of the mould. As the mould is in low relief, excess clay from the sides is used to build up prominent features of the mask: the nose, eyes, lips, chin, or, as in the case of Maha Kali, skeletal features. This gives the high relief areas greater strength.

It took Visnu Bahadur about forty-five minutes to flatten the clay and apply it to the mould for the commissioned mask of Maha Kali. When he built up the areas of high relief, he worked slowly, adding clay, smoothing it with water, then adding more clay and smoothing it again with water until he was finally pleased with the resultant form. After completing this process, he smoothed the entire mask with water and cut the overlapping sides to fit the contour of the mould.

The true Nava Durga moulds are kept in the holy house at Ya che. It is said that these moulds "are very old, since the time of the Nava Durga." (Surya Bahadur). The moulds are made from *dya ca*, and sometimes one breaks. When this happens, the mask-maker mends it rather than making a new one. The true moulds are reportedly larger than the one used for the commissioned Nava Durga mask. However, there was little difference in size that I could see between the commissioned Maha Kali mask, 18 1/2 inches high, and the true Maha Kali mask used in the Nava Durga ceremonies. The eye is not the most accurate measuring stick, but it is forbidden to photograph or measure the actual mask because it is believed the Nava Durga would become angry.

The clay mask forms are left to dry, on the moulds, for about four days. During this time "they shrink and begin to harden like stone." (Surya Bahadur). Visnu Bahadur always dries the mask forms inside because the sun dries them out too quickly, and they could crack beyond repair. Small cracks can be corrected. When Visnu Bahadur and his son, holding the four corners of the black cloth, carefully lifted the commissioned mask off the mould, they discovered that the mask was still damp. As it was dry enough to retain its shape, they left it to dry off the mould for two more days. It had been mixed with water rather than the wheat paste which is used for the true masks, and that may account for the extra time it took to dry.

When the masks have dried and been removed from the moulds, they are painted with a mixture of boiled wheat flour, water, and animal glue which dries to an almost opaque finish. This glue is first applied to the back of the masks and covered with large pieces of jute. The jute backing gives the masks additional strength and prevents them from caving inwards. At certain points on the tops and sides of the masks, two holes about a half an inch apart are pierced through the hardened clay and jute, and strong rope, about an eighth of an inch thick, is drawn through. The ends of these ropes are tied to form a net which will hold the mask in position on the dancer's heads. On a real Nava Durga mask, a layer of cotton cloth is glued to the jute so that the mask's interior is smooth (Surya Bahadur). The same glue is next applied to the front of the mask, and strips of cotton cloth, carefully cut to fit the contours of the mask, are glued in place. When the cloths have dried securely on the surface, the process is repeated with strips of low-grade Nepalese paper, a little heavier than tissue paper. The paper is torn to fit the areas and covered with glue to give it a smoother finish. It took about forty minutes to apply the strips of paper to the commissioned mask. Visnu Bahadur did not put cloth on either the interior or exterior of the commissioned mask, as it was not meant to be worn. He said that cloth on the interior of the actual masks serves to protect the dancer's face, and on the exterior the cloth prevents rain, egg-offerings and the like from seeping into the clay and weakening the structure of the mask.

When the glued surfaces have dried, which takes about a day, the mask-makers apply a white mixture to the face of the masks. They grind white clay in a pestle and mix it with water and animal glue. The white pigment acts as a primer, a ground, and a base color; it dries within five minutes. Three layers were painted on the commissioned mask. When the final application has dried, the face of the mask is sanded with natural jute fibers which work like a fine grade of steel wool to give the surface an even smoother finish.

Once the white clay primer has been sanded to the maker's satisfaction, the masks are ready to be painted. In the old days, according to Visnu Bahadur Citrakar, when the trade routes with India were not good, colors were made in Bhaktapur from earthen and metal-ore pigments. Today the paints are purchased from India, in either a solid or powdered form, with the exception of one color, red. This red is found in mines in Nepal. It is a metal-ore, cinnibar, that contains mercury which the mask maker must abstract. The cinnibar is ground to a dust to obtain the desired red pigment. It is only used on the actual Nava Durga masks, and not on a commissioned mask. It is very expensive, but it must be used on the Nava Durga masks because it is "brighter and redder than commercial paints." All the pigments are mixed with an animal glue, which liquifies when heated, and are thinned with water. Paint brushes are bought in Kathmandu.

Although during the months the masks are used much of the original surface of the masks is somewhat obliterated by offerings of eggs, rice, tika-powder and such, great care is taken to paint them correctly. The iconography should be exactly the same as on the original Nava Duga masks. This conformity to the ancient form verifies the endurance

and correctness of the masks through time and provides a sense of confidence and stability in the inherent meanings and powers encoded in these objects. Visnu Bahadur said that he "got the correct knowledge of these shapes and colors from a very old book, a special book on the paintings of the Nava Durga masks." This book, of which I was only permitted to see a few pages, is not considered to be sacred, nor does it explain the iconography of the masks. It contains notations on the proper hues along with extensive detailed drawings of the original Nava Durga masks. As it has been handed down through the generations many of the pages have been recopied. Even though the mask-maker works within a strict iconographical tradition, no art is entirely static. Over a period of time, some minor changes always occur, though they do not necessarily alter the encoded message or intent of the object. As the Nava Durga masks are traditionally burned every year and cannot be photographed, there is no way to know just how much or how little the masks vary from the originals. If the book had been better preserved, it might have shed some light on this problem.

In painting the commissioned mask of Maha Kali, Visnu Bahadur did not draw any preliminary marks on the white clay surface. He began to paint the essential form lines from memory with a commercial light-red paint and a thin brush. It took him close to an hour to outline all the essential elements, and once he began to work he rarely looked away from the mask. At one point he asked to have the pigment and glue mixture reheated, as it was beginning to solidify. Although he could have easily erased or wiped a line clean, he did not; he worked with the ease and certainty of an experienced artist.

The painting of the mask took two days. After outlining all the essential elements, Visnu Bahadur began to fill in color areas that did not overlap. When an area had dried, he would re-paint it if it required a darker or richer color. The green headdress and the deep red on the commissioned mask were re-painted several times. He said that although it does not matter, he usually prefers to commence painting with the colors light-red or blue.

When the essential areas had been painted to his satisfaction, Visnu Bahadur began to paint the smaller elements, such as the five golden brown crowns on the green headdress. **These smaller elements are then outlined in black. The fine details are added last. White, yellow, red and black are used as form lines.** The color of the form lines seems to have been consciously chosen with regard to the color of the ground. Black, for example, is considered a better form line on green than on white, yellow or red, whereas white and yellow are better on a red ground. White and yellow are used interchangeably as form lines on Maha Kali's face, to accentuate her boniness, as well as to indicate the wrinkles on her skin. Visnu Bahadur said that "they make clear the shape of the bone and it is more artistic to work with two separate colors." His son Surya added, "Maha Kali has a skeleton face and all the corners of the bones have to be painted differently."

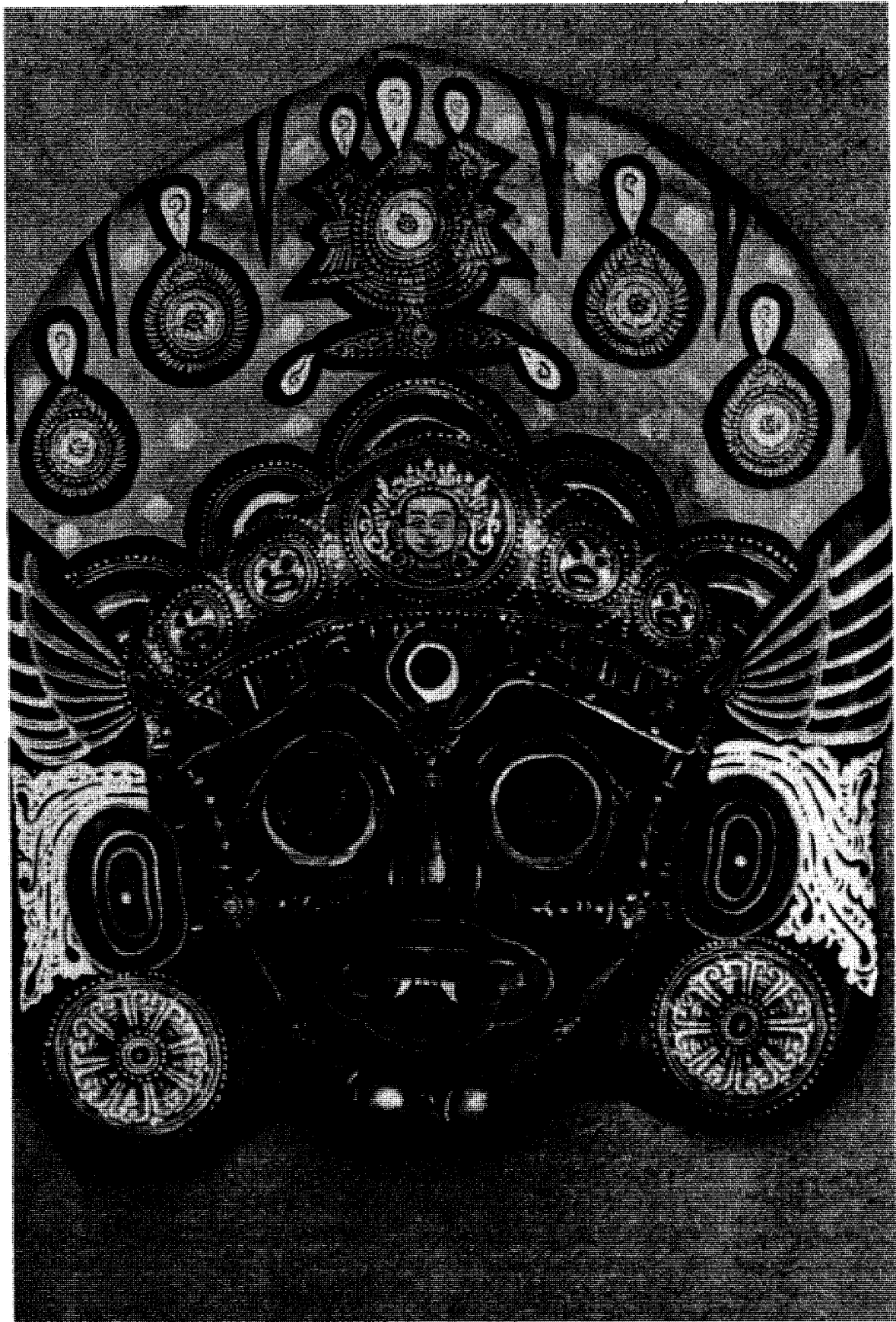
Color in the Nava Durga masks serves several functions. It is primarily symbolic. Specific manifestations and moods of the gods and goddesses are color-coded so that the non-initiates can recognize them. Color is used to heighten or decrease the emotional

effect of the masks. For example, red, blue-black and white are the most powerful colors. The folk level interpretation of the tantric color symbolism is that red stands for menstrual blood, sacrificial blood and anger; blue-black stands for energy and power, and white stands for male semen, purity and death (bleached bones). The "milder colors" such as yellow signify the "gentler" gods and goddesses (Visnu Bahadur and Dr. Robert Levy) and color is also used for its own aesthetic properties. Gold paint, which is found on the ridge line of the nose, bony chins and some eyebrows, is used to heighten the grandeur of the gods and goddesses and for beautification. "Gold is a sign of nobility and wealth."

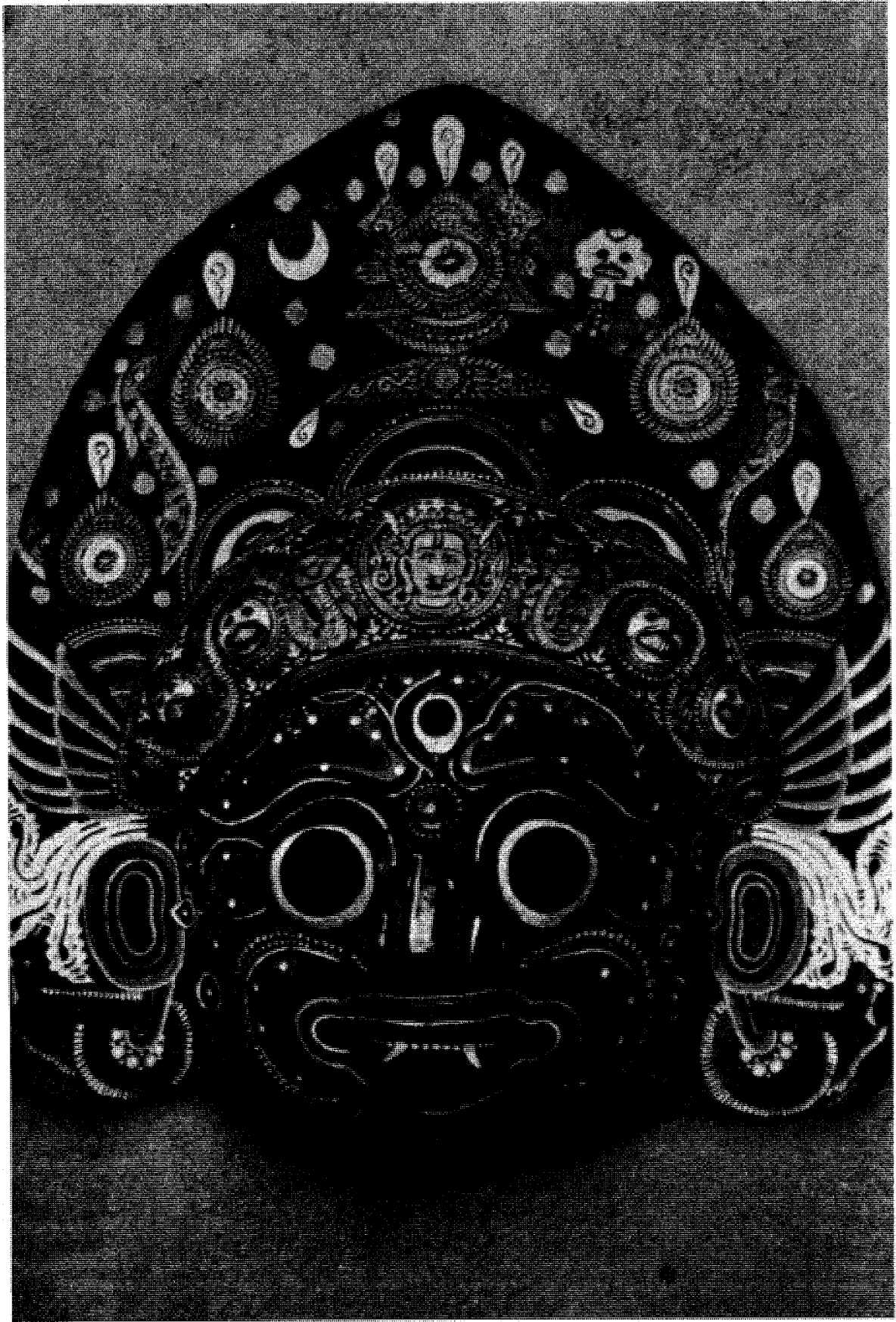
The masks are varnished, after painting, with several applications of the beaten whites of duck eggs. Duck eggs are used in preference to chicken eggs because they are larger and it is easier to separate the yolk. However, Krishna Prasad Prajapati suggested that duck eggs are used because the duck is worshipped by the prajapati caste. The duck taught them how to mix the proper soil for making pots, and as the prajapati tell the gathas where to find the *dya ca*, there may be a symbolic connection. The egg whites are beaten until they are almost stiff and then quickly applied with a paint brush to prevent air bubbles. When they have been varnished with egg whites, the masks are finished. (Commercial varnish is used on tourist masks as it requires only one coat and takes no time to prepare.)

It took about seven days to complete the commissioned mask of Maha Kali, but Visnu Bahadur must complete the thirteen Nava Durga masks within one month. With assistance, he could probably apply all the sacred *dya ca* to all the moulds in one long day, or a day and a half. All the masks could be pulled from the moulds within three or four days, and the remaining month could be devoted to finishing the masks. Therefore, the time allowed to make all the masks, including the two hidden masks, does not seem either excessive or limiting.

Visnu Bahadur's favorite mask is Maha Kali, because "it is the most difficult mask to mould and paint, and because it is the most beautiful." Second to Maha Kali is the mask of Bhairava. Most of the masks follow the contour of the mould, but the mask of Maha Kali, with its high skeletal relief, must be carefully built up. The painting of this mask also takes time and intense concentration, because the colors must be exact, particularly the different values of red. The dark red must accentuate "the hollowness, because there is no flesh, no meat under the skin. The light red shows that the skin is tight on the bone." Though Bhairava is even more difficult to paint than Maha Kali, the building of the mask takes less time because it closely follows the contours of the mould. Visnu Bahadur said that the easiest masks, and therefore the least interesting to make, are the masks of Sima and Duma. The conceptualization of their mouths is interesting, however: **their teeth are in the center of recessed ovoids composed of triangular elements. They are roaring and the triangular design represents the inside of the mouth.** I noticed that the masks of Brahmani, Vaisnavi and even Seto Bhairava have simpler mould forms and fewer elements to paint. It may be that Visnu Bahadur does not like to make the masks of Sima and Duma because of the role they play in the Nava Durga pantheon.



The finished mask of the commissioned Mahakali, (18 $\frac{1}{4}$ " x 14 $\frac{1}{2}$ ")



Bhairava, a commissioned mask. (19 1/2" x 16")

When the masks are completed, Visnu Bahadur makes a careful final examination of each mask to assure that the structure is sound and that no mistakes have been made in the iconography. Although they are not checked by the Taleju priest, he suggested that the dancers also examine them when they come to take the masks "as they know how the Nava Durga masks must look."

If a Nava Durga mask should break, Visnu Bahadur said that it would not be repaired. "They would dance with the Nava Durga mask in its damaged state." He said that this had never happened, and "it will not happen if one works carefully, particularly on the beginning stages of the process."

After the Completion of the Nava Durga Masks: the Gathas' Role

The completed masks are exhibited in the holy house at Ya che on the first day of Dasain. The gatha dancers have spent many days learning tantric procedures from their own caste guru, as well as learning addition mantras from the Taleju priest. "All the tantras and mantras will enable them to handle the power of the masks." (Krishna Banamala) They come to Ya che to "steal" the masks. In the past they left some payment for the maker of the masks; this is not always the case today. That same evening, the dancers take the masks to Brahmani where they attach gilded copper crowns to twelve of the masks.

Gilded Copper Crowns

The crowns, even though they are not sacred, are stored in the Nava Durga god-house in Ga che when they are not in use. They are not as old as the masks. They were, according to Visnu Bahadur, given as a present to the Nava Durga by some rich man, thirty or forty years ago. The crowns were made, and are repaired when necessary, by the tamrakar caste. Krishna Banamal said, "the crowns have no magic; there is no selected family or particular person chosen to repair the crowns. The crowns are heavy, and together, the mask and crown weigh about twenty pounds."

All the crowns have the same basic structure; only the details differ. They consist of two main elements which are joined by a brace bar. The brace bar is attached to the upper part of the mask. A circular bar wrapped in cloth is attached to the lower part of the mask and rests on the shoulders of the dancer.

The back element of the crown is a solid sheet of gilded copper. The exterior surface is decorated in repoussé with the main symbol or emblem of the particular god or goddess: Indrani, the thunderbolt; Brahmani, the book of knowledge; Vaisnavi, the mace; Mahesvari, the trisul; Kumari, the water pot; Ganesa, the radish; Sima, the tiger; and Duma, the lion. Siva wears no crown. Seto Bhairava wears a simplified crown without an emblem. The emblem for Maha Kali, Bhairava and Varahi is a mane of real yak hair. The mane is attached to their crowns because "in real life they had wild looking hair as an aspect of their fierce appearance."

At the apex of the back element is a spire of graduated rings with a rounded finial. This spire, or pinnacle structure, is also found on the top of every Nepalese temple. It is called a *gaju*.

The front element of the crown, an oblong arch, or aureole, is smaller than the back element. It projects above and follows the contour of the mask. The interior is devoid of decoration and the exterior has ornate flower motifs and crescent moons.

A gilded flag protrudes from each side of the mask. "They wear these flags because it is tantric, they have lots of meanings. They are the sakti of the Nava Durga and they are needed in every big puja for the gods and goddesses." The flags are attached to the wrapped cross-piece. Almost hidden behind the painted headdress of the mask, attached to the brace bar, is a lingam. It is difficult to see; Bhagatamal Banamal said it was "a Siva lingam, it is Siva's head."

The crowns denote the power, royalty and sanctity of the Nava Durga. As all the masks, with the exception of Seto Bhairava, have five (for the five tantric elements) crowns painted on their headdresses, these are an additional embellishment of honor and status. It may be that these gilded crowns, which were a later adaptation, also have a practical function. It is easiest, in a large ceremonial crowd, to recognize and follow any particular Nava Durga by its emblem, which stands above the mass of participants.

Costumes: the Special Dress of the Nava Durga

After the gilded crowns have been attached to the masks, the dancers put on their special dress or costumes. They wear a skirt (*jama*), that covers the knees, and a blouse with short sleeves (*bhoto*). The dancers' out-fits are not sacred but "they must be correct." The gathas give an old costume to a tailor (or anyone who can sew), to be copied. "The tailor must have the old costume to copy so that it can be correct."

Five colors are used in the Nava Durga costume; black, red, green, yellow or gold, and white. I was told that the order of these colors had no symbolic significance; black is always on the bottom edge of the skirt for practical reasons. The horizontal strips of color are of approximately even widths. On Varahi's skirt for example, the colors were, from the bottom; black, red, green, yellow, white, gold and red.

The blouses are color-coded to match the face of the mask. Seto Bhairava, Ganesa, Sima and Mahesvari wear white blouses; Bhairava, black; Brahmani, yellow; and Vaisnavi, green; the others wear blouses of various shades of red. Appliqued on the backs of the blouses is a white crescent moon with a protruding triangular element in the middle. It looks like a profile view of the universal man in the moon. "The crescent is a half moon, the half moon is the power of the moon, it is the power symbol of the moon. The Nava Durga get their power from the moon, it is a symbol of Siva." The blouse also has small tabs of cloth at the shoulder line. The color of these tabs varies; Mahesvari has yellow tabs, and Varahi has green tabs. Most of the short sleeves are faced in yellow cloth. Around

their waists they wear a wide band of white cloth. The dancers wear gold bracelets and silver necklaces of linked chain. One necklace is always linked to a large horizontal crescent moon pendant, the sign of Siva. Silver bells are worn below the waist cloth and strapped to their calves.

These above-the-ordinary costumes have a similarity which marks, and communicates to the participants, the Nava Durgas' special group relationship. The costumes unify the group, whereas specific iconographical elements found on the masks and crowns distinguish the individual gods and goddesses.

Life Force Given at Taleju

Ceremonially dressed, the gathas proceed to the main temple, Taleju, with the Nava Durga masks. The masks are taken to Taleju to give them a life force independent of the gathas who wear them. "The Nava Durga masks are given life by the priest of Taleju, by the Nava Durga gods and goddesses, and by tantras and mantras." This life-giving ritual occurs late at night or early in the morning.

Once the masks have been given life, the gathas take them to their own temple at Ga che. Here they are displayed, when not being worn by the dancers, until the final ceremony in June. The icon of Mahalaksmi is kept in her small chariot on the ground floor, and is visible from the doorway. The masks are kept on the second floor. When the Nava Durga are not performing in public, the people come here to make pujas to the gods and goddesses. They make offerings of eggs and other foods.

The dancers are now ready for the first public dance of the Nava Durga, which is traditionally held in Susimere tol on the square before the small temple of Visnu. The Nava Durga will then dance, in accordance with the astrological calendar, perhaps ninety times in the eight month period. (Krishna Banamal).

The Dancers

Oral tradition tells how the Nava Durga told the gathas that they wanted to move through the city and dance. The Nava Durga love dance, drink and blood sacrifices, particularly the pig which is the lowest and most filthy of the animal sacrifices. The Nava Durga needed the gathas as their vehicles and the gathas, who are of a lower caste status, wanted the honor of dancing and care for the Nava Durga. The gathas are allowed to raise pigs and they like being with the Nava Durga.

There are about a hundred families directly descended from the original Nava Durga gathas; only men from this group can dance or work for the Nava Durga. There are approximately ninety men who can dance, and the privilege of dancing is rotated among them. Those who belong to major families (determined by descent line and primogeniture) dance more often than those of minor families. A dancer can also sell his right to dance to a gatha who wants to dance out of turn and accrue more merit. Dancers must learn all the

dances of the Nava Durga. Krishna Banamal said: "Sometimes we will dance only for one god, but most of the time we dance for all the Nava Durga in the eight month period."

Krishna Banamal was eighteen when he first danced. He did not train to dance as a boy, but watched and sometimes, like other gatha boys, wore a costume, like Sima or Duma, to ask for money. When old enough, between the ages of eighteen and twenty, the men begin their dance training under the supervision of the Nava Durga gatha priests. The dancers train or rehearse for one or two months before Dasain, depending upon their talent and experience. If a man is not a talented dancer, he is not allowed to dance and may sell his right to dance to others.

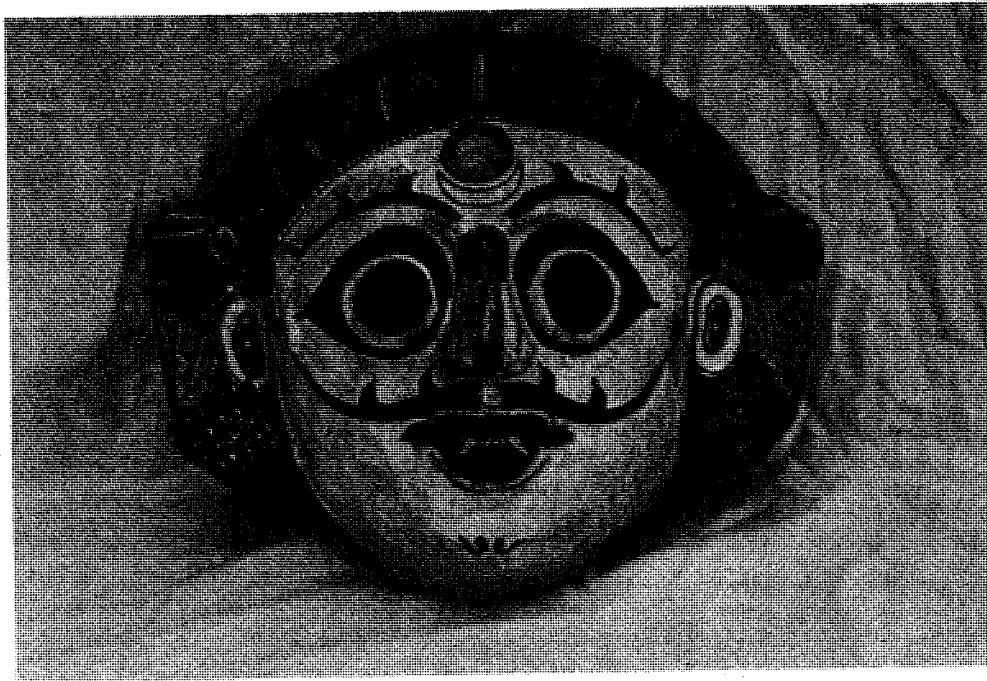
Krishna Banamal explained that "the Nava Durga dances are all similar, but certain gods and goddesses have different dances that only they do. Sima and Duma dance together. When Maha Kali or Kumari dance with Seto Bhairava, it is different than when they dance alone, and Maha Kali, Varahi and Bhairava dance differently from the rest. Only Maha Kali, Varahi and Bhairava dance with a sword, it is a symbol of their fierceness. Most of us like to dance with Maha Kali or Bhairava. I especially like to dance with Bhairava because he has to do sacrifices and other special things, and he dances for a long time. But I must wait my turn with the other men to dance with Bhairava." He added, "When I wear the face of Bhairava or Maha Kali, I feel different. I feel that I am a part of Bhairava and sometimes I will go mad. Sometimes, when I wear the face of Bhairava, I do not feel the god in me and then I drink a lot of wine. Then I dance more smoothly and begin to feel the god. When I am dancing, I will not see anybody. I dance for myself and the Nava Durga gods and goddesses."

The masked dancers are the surrogates of the Nava Durga. Unlike the Devi dancers, they are not actors; nor are they entirely transformed in the sense of a shaman. The masks and the masked dancers are god-equivalents.

The gathas who belong to the Nava Durga have other ritual responsibilities in addition to dancing, although dancing is one of the more honored positions. Some work in the Nava Durga god-house, others play the drum or cymbals, or carry a basket filled with food and drink for the dancers, or uphold Mahalaksmi's chariot. All the positions are rotated, but the major families are more privileged in the frequency of their roles. Those who do not have a role to play in the Nava Durga tend to their work in the fields or gardens.

The gathas who work in the Nava Durga god-house stay for one year and they reportedly sleep there. There is a male and female leader, whom the other gathas help because someone must always be there to receive the offerings and, in addition to the masks and icon of Mahalaksmi, there are statues, ornaments and other sacred objects that must be cared for. (Krishna Banamal)²

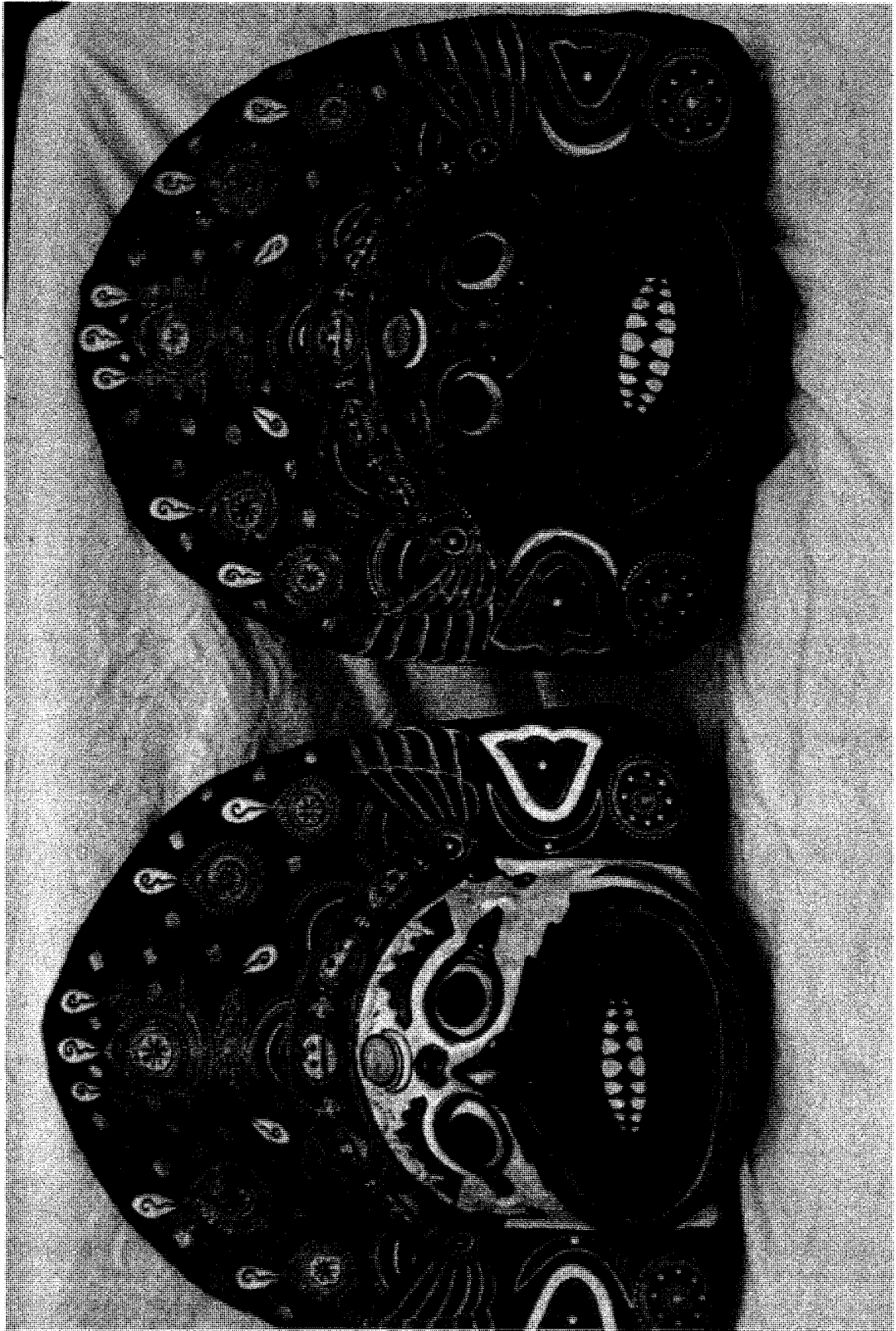
2. Visnu Bahadur says that the dancers live in their own houses in Inachole tal and that no one sleeps in the Nava Durga god-house in Ga che. He added that the gathas, particularly the dancers, go every day to the god-house to keep watch, but go home at night and



Seto Bhairava, a commissioned mask. (8 1/2" x 10 1/2")



Shiva and Ganesh commissioned masks. (Shiva: 13" x 8", Ganesh: 18" x 15")



Sima and Duma, commissioned masks. (Shima: 15 1/8 x 13 1/2", Duma: 15 1/2" x 13 3/8")

Talented gathas also take turns as musicians. They are taught how to play the cymbals and drum. The drum is shaped like a wooden keg with leather heads. A leather strap circles the player's head, so that he has both hands free to play when he walks and accompanies the dancers. This drum is considered special and is only used for the Nava Durga ceremonies. Twisted ram's horns are attached to the top of the drum and projecting from the middle of the horns is a phallic gold lingam called "Siva's head." Hanging from the horns is a magic leather bag called *moni tala*. Just above the *moni tala* hangs a small gold mask of Siva. The barrel of the drum is covered with red and yellow puja dust, a mark of the offerings that are made to the drum.

The cymbals are also sacred and are only used for the Nava Durga ceremonies. They are of two sizes; the larger are about eight inches in diameter, and the smaller about four inches. They have been gilded and were probably cast from brass. When they are not in use, the cymbals are placed near the drum.

Before performing, the dancer touches the drum heads with both hands and then places both hands on the hands of the drummer. Next, he touches the cymbals and the cymbalist picks them up, touching them to his forehead. This reportedly transfers the magic of the Nava Durga dancers to the musical instruments.

The gathas who perform in the Nava Durga ceremonies identify so strongly with the gods and goddesses that they would not be interviewed until after the Nava Durga masks had been burned.

The Concluding Nava Durga Ceremonies

Early in June, the Nava Durga leave their god-house late at night when the non-initiated public will not see them, because, as Visnu Bahadur explained, "They are in an angry mood and might hurt or kill someone. Maha Kali is especially angry because she knows that they are going to Taleju where their greater magic and life force will be taken from them." In Taleju, "the high priest will take away their sakti by mantras and by having them eat some sacred food, *se ja*, a cooked, red rice. The priest cuts the life of the gods and goddesses, and even if the dancer tries his very best to dance with the mask, he can not. The dancer can only walk and do an occasional twirl, as there is little magic left in him." On the way to Taleju, the Nava Durga and the musicians run and dance "madly" through the streets; on their return, they walk, with their masks to the side or on top of their heads so that their faces are visible. "The dancers feel sad because the life of the gods and goddesses has been cut from them."

share the offerings of food and money with the other gathas. This is their only payment. Both of the dancers, however, insisted that the leaders slept in the god-house to care for the sacred objects.

A few days later, the sakti-less Nava Durga make their final public performance. During this "last day", Bhagasti, the gathas are busy preparing for the secret night ceremony. They collect a special wood, *gusyi*, which is only used for funeral pyres. The *gusyi* is taken to a secret place near the *pith*, or holy place, of Brahmani, on the Hanumante river. This is one of several selected areas where the local people burn the dead. One or more gathas will stay here, on Bhagasti, to prevent the people from bringing a dead person until the masks have been ritually burned.

Music is played in the evening to let the people know that the Nava Durga are coming out for the last time. This music is not played by the gathas, and I was told that it was not the music of the Nava Durga. When the Nava Durga come out, the dancers wear the masks over their faces, but after a halting twist-turn, they stop and place the masks to the side or on top of their heads. Sima and Duma are without masks, for, on Bhagasti, the people can buy the privilege of carrying these masks for merit. The Nava Durga congregate before the god house; their costumes are either new or extremely clean for this last appearance.

The Nava Durga walk to each *tol*, paying tribute to specific temples along the way. Before a temple, the dancers may be picked up by other men and whirled around or they may attempt to dance by themselves for a minute; then, as if exhausted by the effort, they knock heads together and walk slowly on. When they attempt to dance, they place their masks over their faces.

After paying tribute to the holy building of Mahesvari, the Nava Durga pause for a sacrifice to Bhairava. A baby pig, the unique vehicle of the Nava Durga, is given to Bhairava, who tears out its heart. As the Nava Durga are ritually forbidden to use a knife or other instruments, he tears the thin skin under the pig's forelegs with his fingernails, inserts his hand and pulls out the heart. The dancers are taught how to do this during their training at Taleju. (Krishna Banamal)

After visiting all the tols, the Nava Durga go to the temple of Visnu. They performed their first dance of the season here, eight months ago. The gathas now sacrifice a ram. (Perhaps it is this ram's horns which are placed on the sacred drum.) Only those directly involved in the Nava Durga ritual are allowed to be at this ceremony. Krishna Banamal said that if the dancers had done something wrong during the Nava Durga season they would be punished like the ram in this or in the next life. The reference to being punished is curious, as most sacrificial animals consent to the sacrifice by nodding their heads, and if they do not consent they are allowed to live and become the sacred animal of the god's temple. In addition, this is the only ceremonial sacrifice to the Nava Durga in which the animal's throat is slit with a knife. Since the Nava Durga are not allowed to use a knife, its use here may carry a threat to prevent the dancers from abusing the powers of the gods and goddesses.

The masks are burned after the ram sacrifice. This is witnessed only by the dancers, the musicians, the leaders of the Nava Durga god-house, and a member of the oil-presser caste (*sami*). The masks are burned on funeral pyres, and the ashes are collected and stored

in a copper vessel which is placed in a secret spot on the river floor near the pith or holy place of Brahmani. The sacred vessel is left in the river until the month before Dasain. The ashes are then used in the creation of the new masks. The copper vessel is stored in Taleju until the following June, when it is once again hidden in the river.

Visnu Bahadur believes that "the Nava Durga leave their masks and their gathas to go into the water because the water is necessary for the planting of rice; they help increase the water for the rice crops."

Conclusion

I emphasize two themes concerning the traditions of the Nava Durga in Bhaktapur; the Nava Durga ceremonies are ritually marked by a set of masks which have an efficacy that is not restricted to the period of time that they are worn, and these ceremonies and rituals integrate many ideologies and beliefs, a number of which concern the agricultural cycle.

The Nava Durga masks have special properties that distinguish them from ordinary masks. To begin with, each new set of Nava Durga masks is ritually linked with past by their process of fabrication and the fact that each set of masks contains the ashes of the preceding generations of Nava Durga masks. Secondly, the masks are the focal point of the Nava Durga ceremonies because they are god-equivalents. The masks can be worn to the side or held upward during a dance, because of this god-equivalence, and it is relatively unimportant whether or not they conceal the face of wearer, unlike other mask traditions. What is important is that these masks, worn or not, are perceived as markers that impose a meaning on the endless flux of events. The Nava Durga masks are one way of capturing, making static and manipulating, within specific cultural contexts, certain meanings that transcend social reality.

At the folk level, the Nava Durga ceremonies have a meaning which is directed to the non-initiated public, eighty per cent of whom are farmers. Some of the ceremonies focus on the assistance these gods and goddesses give with agricultural production. "The Nava Durga help all the farmers and gardeners with their crops, because they were found by a farmer and cared for by gardeners." (Krishna Banamal) Even the essential material used in making the Nava Durga masks, a dark malleable clay (rather than wood, copper or brass), can be interpreted as a symbolic referent to the agricultural cycle. And when it rains on Bhagasti, "it is a good omen for the rice crops."

Visnu Bahadur observed: "The people of Bhaktapur make pujas and sacrifices to the Nava Durga in order to please the gods and goddesses. It depends on the ideas of the people whether to give puja or not. If someone believes in them, they will go and give puja; if one does not wish to be involved, he won't go. But today some of the people are losing their faith in the Nava Durga because the world is changing and because they feel the gathas are too greedy. The gathas demand too many offerings and when the people make their offerings, sometimes the gathas will not let them break the egg in the name of the

gods and goddesses.” It may be that the gathas are abusing their ritual privileges; the gathas want more offerings and as the people lose faith, less offerings are given. But, the world of Bhaktapur is changing, and perhaps, with it, the two hundred year old tradition of these unique Nava Durga ceremonies.